LESSON 12
POST-COLD WAR CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: THE MIDDLE EAST

"Often, someone who has learned a good deal of past history remains unaware of the changes that conditions have undergone. Without a moment's hesitation, he applies his knowledge (of the present) to historical information, and measures such information by the things he has observed with his own eyes, although the difference between the two is great. Consequently, he falls into an abyss of error."

—Ibn Khaldûn, 14th-century Islamic scholar and statesman, from his history of the world, *Muqaddimah*

Lesson Introduction

The Middle East as we understand it today emerged from World War I when the victorious Western Alliance carved up the defeated Ottoman Empire. The European powers believed that they could transform the region politically and introduced an artificial state system that, in many respects, remains at odds with the basis of political life for its predominantly Muslim population. The United States had very little involvement in the region after World War I except to protect American commercial interests and to insist upon Arab self-determination and eventual independence within a framework of European mandates. But every American president since World War II has described the Middle East as being "vital" to American interests. In that regard, U.S. strategy toward the region since the end of World War II has been characterized by three basic tenets: ensuring the survival of Israel; blocking the Soviet Union from establishing hegemony in the area; and guaranteeing the uninterrupted flow of oil to the global economy and, in particular, to the United States. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new tacit goal has emerged: promoting political and social reform in a region historically governed by tribal monarchies and military despotisms. More recently, the dominant feature of U.S. strategy in the region has been the effort to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli problem. Coloring this maelstrom has been the relationship of the West to Islam.

Ostensibly, the overriding American objective in the Middle East has always been to achieve stability. But in the last twenty years alone over one million people in the region have lost their lives as a result of war and other violence. Perhaps the only clearly enunciated strategy toward the region was the Eisenhower Doctrine, which declared the U.S. intention to offer economic and military aid to Middle Eastern states as well as to protect, with U.S. armed forces if necessary, the territorial integrity and political independence of these states. Nominally, the doctrine **operationalized** containment strategy in the region in that it purported to protect non-communist Arab states against Soviet encroachment, but it also sought to contain radical Arab nationalism. By offering economic and military aid and the more explicit guarantee of American military protection the Eisenhower Administration hoped to convince Arab governments to side

openly with the West in the Cold War. But aside from the Eisenhower Doctrine, there has arguably been no clearly articulated American strategy for the region.

Student Requirements by Educational Objective

Requirement 1

Objective 1. Explain the major challenges that the Middle East poses to U.S. policy and strategy. [JPME Areas 3(a)(e), 4(b)]

Objective 2. Discuss how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict fits into the Middle East strategic situation. [JPME Areas 3(a)(e), 4(b)]

Objective 3. Identify the regional inter-state factors the United States must take into account in forming a regional strategy in the Middle East. [JPME Area 3(e)]

Objective 4. Discuss the nature of U.S. policy and strategy regarding the Middle East and alternative futures in that regard. [JPME Areas 3(e), 4(a)]

Listen:

- "Power Talk" with Peter Stulting: A Marine Corps College of Continuing Education exclusive interview with General Anthony Zinni, USMC (Retired), on the Middle East (40 minutes)

Read:

- James Bill and Rebecca Chavez, "The Politics of Incoherence: The United States and the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* (Autumn 2002), pp. 562 to 575 (13 pages)
- Michael Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of U.S. Policy Toward the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* (Summer 1996), pp. 329 to 343 (14 pages)
- Augustus Norton, "America's Approach to the Middle East: Legacies, Questions, and Possibilities," *Current History* (Jan 2002), pp. 3 to 7 (5 pages)

Defining the Middle East

It is important to define the Middle East when we use the term in a lesson such as this one. There is a tendency to equate the Middle East with Arabs. This is not altogether surprising, but it is not altogether accurate. The Arab world is generally regarded as encompassing the whole of North Africa from Morocco in the west to the Arabian Peninsula in the east (stretching from Syria and Iraq in the north to Yemen in the south). Sudan is often considered to be part of the Arab world, but Iran is not. Yet Iran is generally thought of as belonging to the Middle East, whereas Sudan is mostly regarded

as African. One cannot limit the Middle East to Islamic peoples, either. For one thing, although the majority of the Middle East is Muslim, the majority of Muslims live outside the Middle East. Indeed, the three peoples of "western" or "inner" Islam (used so as to distinguish these peoples from the "outer" Islam of central and eastern Asia) are the Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. However, Turkey is more associated with Europe than the Middle East, even though the Turks ruled in the Middle East for half a millennium. Today, the Middle East can be defined geographically as narrowly as the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and parts of Turkey and Iraq) or so broadly as to include Egypt and Libya to the west, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, and as far south as Somalia, which lays astride the *Bab el Mandeb*, one of three vital choke points of the "Strategic Gulf" (in addition to the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz). The term "Middle East" itself was coined by western Europeans to describe that part of the globe considered being midway between Europe and East Asia (traditionally called the "Far East"). Thus defined, and suiting our purposes for this lesson, it includes Cyprus, the Asian part of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, the countries of the Arabian peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait), Egypt, and Libya.

Islam's Importance in the Region

Promoting democracy abroad has been a central tenet of American foreign policy since the end of World War I, and it is clear that this trend continues. U.S. national security strategy sees democratization as the key to achieving U.S. national security interests. Generally speaking, this means promoting the Western (or American) model of democracy. As a result, observers in the West applaud so-called liberal reformers in the Middle East who reflect this Western democratic outlook. Looking to such Islamic reformers, many American and European commentators call for a **Reformation of Islam** that will lead to the separation of religion and state as occurred in the West. But for a majority of Muslims in the region today, many of whose roots date back at least 1,400 years, no state can remain legitimate unless it is rooted in the main teachings of the *sharia* (the code of law based on the Koran). In short, in a predominantly Muslim state, Islam must be the principal frame of reference for the creation of constitutional machinery. To that end, Islamic teachings condemn tyranny and corruption and offer certain democratic credentials of some utility in terms of creating an Islamic democracy. However, many Middle Easterners view political secularism as advocated by the West as simply a means to obtain their submission to neo-colonialist policies. According to this view, secular governments in the region can only survive if backed by Western power, thus setting up the conditions for continued Western hegemony. At the same time, Western powers pursue policies that protect democracy in their own states but, as was the case with France in Algeria, do not extend these same democratic rights to the local population. Thus, it is believed by many that Western democratic powers sustain regional despotisms to promote stability because doing so serves their larger neo-colonial interests. As a result, many Middle Easterners will rally to whomever raises the banner of "true independence," including Islamists of a radical bent. Of course, the reply to this blind following is that the real obstacle to political liberty in the Middle East is the misuse of Islam to provide religious sanction to otherwise corrupt and autocratic regimes

of indigenous origin. Regardless, Islam remains at the heart of the matter. The challenge, then, is to create regimes that are at once Islamic and also representative and accountable. In the end, the people of the Middle East will have to sort out these paradoxes and contradictions for themselves.

Perceptions of U.S. Policy in the Middle East

Many Middle Easterners regard American intervention in the region as the natural by-product of the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to this line of thinking, Soviet interests in the Middle East offset any American hegemonic pretensions, but with the Soviets out of the way, the United States no longer need be concerned about Russian interference. Evidence given by those of this perception is the fact that the U.S. has taken over several of the Soviets' former clients (e.g., Egypt). In that regard, U.S. policy in the region is considered by many Middle Easterners to be pure power politics, and American assertions regarding humanitarian or other benign motivations are regarded as disingenuous. Of course the reverse is probably true: the U.S. has tried to disengage from the region since the end of the Cold War, but U.S. policy-makers realize that they cannot walk away, lest the Middle East descend into chaos. Nevertheless, many in the region (as well as individuals in the United States itself) see American interests there as exclusively tied to oil, and where oil is not a player, the U.S. will only respond to crises that threaten to spill over into areas where oil is of concern.

In light of this quandary, the interesting question to ponder is whether U.S. policy is indeed and should remain that of *realpolitik* or more appropriately borne of an idealist or liberal perspective in which our principal role is to promote democracy in the region. For example, Israel played a prominent regional role in the strategy of containment during the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a realist might argue that Israel is no longer useful in terms of American global strategy or even regional strategy and may in fact be a hindrance to achieving U.S. interests there. On the other hand, an idealist would argue that we have a continuing moral obligation to preserve Israel's national survival as the one true democratic state in the Middle East. Interestingly, the current situation is not unlike that following World War I. As the historian Edward Hallet Carr has noted, policy-makers in Europe following World War I took an aggressive, realist approach, whereas U.S. policy-makers were more idealists, especially President Wilson before his death. In the end, of course, power politics won out. But, even then, the Europeans couched their designs on the region in primarily idealist terms, proclaiming their adherence to Wilson's notions of self-determination but applying them in such a manner as to aggrandize themselves. This notion has not been lost on Middle Eastern peoples as they consider current American actions in the region. Thus, if Middle Easterners regard the U.S. as a neo-colonial power, it little matters whether U.S. policies are well intentioned or not.

Regional Inter-state Factors

Many observers in the West are convinced that events in the Middle East are driven by ideology, either pan-Arab nationalism or Islamic radicalism. Consequently, any strategy developed for the region must satisfy demands rooted in certain grievances. In practice, this means the U.S. must either attend to the aspirations of the Arab street or appease extant regimes in order to assure stability in the region. However, this view overlooks the history and nature of inter-state relations and machinations amongst and between Middle Eastern states.

Arguably, at least since the end of World War II, states in the region have been far more interested in pursuing their own self-interest than any sort of pan-Arab unity or the restoration of any ostensible Islamic *caliphate* (an Islamic jurisdiction based upon some leader of an Islamic polity). In that sense, governments in the region can be examined in terms of their interests and resultant patterns of behavior. With the departure of the European empires following World War II, state policies in the Middle East were generally promulgated in relation to Soviet Union or American patronage. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, states in the region have become freer to seek their own interests relative to American interests. In that regard, aspirations to regional hegemony have always played a major role in Middle Eastern politics.

Pan-Arab nationalists and revolutionary Islamists have consistently sought to seize state power in an attempt to unite the region, generally from below. At the state level, candidates for regional hegemony remain principally Egypt, Syria, and, formerly, Iraq. Interestingly, the Nile River valley and the Fertile Crescent have always been the centers of regional imperial ambitions. Egypt is generally regarded to be the logical leader of the Arab world, but despite Nasser's more aggressive behavior, his successors have, for the most part, pursued a strategy of moderation and consensus building as opposed to military conquest.

Syria has a more aggressive vision of a "greater Syria." Moreover, Syria has never recognized Lebanon, Israel, or Palestine as states and continues to describe the West Bank as "southern Syria." Syria currently dominates Lebanon, and, were it not for U.S. and Israeli threats, might very well have invaded and conquered Jordan in 1970.

Iran has centuries-old regional aspirations as well, and current revolutionary Islamic doctrine in Iran may mask broader ambitions. On the other hand, the Gulf States are non-players in terms of regional hegemonic ambitions. As a result, they have pursued essentially one or more of three strategies: appeasement, alliance with a more powerful partner in the region (such as Iraq or Iran), or seeking an outside protector such as the United States or Great Britain. Jordan similarly has aligned itself with the U.S. for protection against its more powerful neighbors. Only Turkey and Israel have expressly denied any regional or sub-regional territorial ambitions.

In the end, each state in the Middle East wants to retain its position relative to other states. But several have wider aspirations, and none wish to lose ground. One could

argue, for example, that a comprehensive Middle East peace is not in the interest of Syria. Israel competes with Syria for influence in Jordan and Lebanon and could block Syrian ambitions there. Similarly, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia may pay homage to the idea of pan-Arab unity, but neither was willing to sacrifice themselves to Iraqi territorial ambitions to achieve that end. Thus, the forces governing state behavior in the region are complex, and U.S. policymakers must seek to understand each state in terms of its motivating interests, internally as well as externally. In realist terms, Middle Eastern states behave as rational actors: the challenge, as with all states, is to ascertain their respective basis of rationality in terms of frame of reference and the interests that motivate each.

U.S. Strategy and Policy Considerations

A useful distinction between states is whether a state acts aggressively to avert loss or to achieve gain. Prospect theory holds that states seeking to avert loss will take higher risks than those seeking gain. Similarly, Clausewitz held that states peering into the future are more likely to act to avoid a deteriorating situation as opposed to one in which the future looks bright or unchanged. It follows, then, that states that see a bleak future and are therefore willing to take greater risk are more difficult to deter. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is often cited as a classic example of a state that acted aggressively to avert loss. Today there remains considerable debate about whether Iraq invaded Kuwait seeking gain or to avert loss. Interestingly, external threats are generally cited as the motivator for such aggression, but internal political problems can provoke similar behavior, and this possibility is often held up as the reason for Iraq's aggression against its neighbor. A state's leadership may attack a neighbor, or seek to provoke an international crisis, in order to ameliorate a domestic problem. In short, the loss to be averted is the loss of power within the state. Many regimes in the Middle East retain a precarious hold on power, and these states may be inclined to act aggressively as a result. Thus, the hostility toward Israel must be seen not only in regional terms, but also in terms of individual state interests. Directing the public's hostile attention to Israel diverts that hostility away from the regime itself.

Therefore, in discussing a nominal U.S. regional strategy for the Middle East, there are many issues that can be explored. For example, what are U.S. interests in the region? In general, political, economic, and military ties between the U.S. and regional powers evidence interests. In that regard, whether the regime in question is democratic (e.g., Jordan), authoritarian (e.g., Syria), or totalitarian (e.g., the former Baathist Iraq under Saddam Hussein) matters greatly. It is unlikely that the U.S. will find itself in a crisis in which military force is an issue with respect to Jordan. This cannot be said of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The role of deterrence amongst the regional powers themselves and how that can be exploited by the United States would be a useful discussion. One can certainly point to the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 as an example of the role of regime weakness in the international behavior of states, or to Jordan in 1970 when the Israelis successfully deterred Syria from intervening in the Jordanian civil war, and lastly the 1973 war warrants discussion (was Egypt motivated by a desire for gain or desire to avert loss or something else, such as forcing the Israelis to the negotiating table

and breaking what was viewed by the Egyptians as an unacceptable status quo?). Obviously the role of pan-Arab ideology and the influence of Islam should be explored.

Whether a state seeks to avert loss or to gain something has an important implication in terms of the military dimension of any U.S. regional strategy for the Middle East. States that are satisfied with the status quo or those that perceive little negative change in the future, relative to their current positions, are easier to deter because of their risk aversion. On the other hand, regional powers willing to take risk to avert loss, especially domestic political loss, are more difficult to deter. The former requires a moderately credible U.S. military threat to deter aggression. The latter undoubtedly will require a more explicit and credible military threat. From a capabilities standpoint, such credibility may rest in the presence of U.S. forces in the region or forces that can deploy rapidly and on short notice. The implications for U.S. force structure and deliberate planning are self-evident. Similarly, a regional deterrence strategy must include the credible capacity to punish would-be aggressors. In terms of deterrence, the threat of such punishment should be sufficient to convince a potential regional aggressor that any potential gain from military action would be greatly offset by the attendant loss resulting from provoking U.S. military retaliation. The ability to prevent an adversary from reaching his objective is more important than the ability to *roll back* an adversary who has obtained his objective. This deterrence may entail military forces positioned in theater in addition to having those that can arrive quickly. Still, forces stationed in-theater pose significant political problems that must be addressed.

Requirement 2

Objective 5. Discuss the importance of cultural perspectives, perceptions, and myths placed within historical context when developing strategic approaches to the Middle East. [JPME Area 3(d)]

Read:

- Thomas L. Friedman, "Inside the Kaleidoscope: The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon," *From Beruit to Jerusalem* (Doubleday, New York 1989), pp. 126 to 155 (29 pages)

The chapter from Thomas Friedman's book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, provides an interesting perspective of how Israelis, various Lebanese groups, and Palestinians viewed each other. He demonstrates through several examples the complex interactions between the many centers of power surrounding the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Even though the author conveys events that occurred in the early 1980s, it can be argued that the cultural separation and the various perceptions by *myth*, which Friedman observed among the players then, still exist today. Additionally, the historical insight he provides about selected individuals within the Israeli leadership hierarchy still has a great deal to do with Israeli leadership attitudes over 20 years later. The roots of the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma are deep and based heavily on the past.

Nevertheless, two challenges exist that will continue to dominate any discussion of Middle East policy for the foreseeable future: the continuing inter-communal conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis and the potential for inter-state war in the region between Israel and one or more of her Arab neighbors. The former may precipitate the latter. Syria, for example, aspires to *strategic parity* with Israel, and Syrian leadership has insisted on occasion that this equivalence can only be accomplished by force. Indeed, the Palestinian issue might provide the justification for such aggression. Thus, a key feature of American strategy for the region is to defuse the Palestinian problem. To do so, the U.S. has attempted to create an environment in which Israel, the Palestinians, and Jordan (which itself has a very large Palestinian population) are able to negotiate a political settlement, one that provides tangible security and recognition of Israel, self-government for the Palestinians, and regional stability.

Lesson Summary

With the conclusion of the most recent war in Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), a more favorable balance of power has emerged in the Middle East. But this war did not eliminate the challenge of establishing a more stable regional order. Iran continues to vie for hegemony in the strategic Gulf. Syria retains a strong pan-Arab and anti-status quo outlook. And although victory in OIF enhanced the security of American friends and allies, the U.S. must also anticipate emergent threats. In that light, the United States will continue to play a crucial role in the Middle East in terms of protecting and promoting U.S. interests there.

Thus, like the previous lesson on China, this lesson presents you with an opportunity to explore the full strategic implications of U.S. policy regarding the Middle East. Again, the discussion should have reinforced your appreciation for the difficulty of formulating strategy. In the next course, Operational Level of War, you will explore how strategy is **operationalized** through military actions.

JPME Summary

AREA 1					AREA 2				AREA 3					AREA 4					AREA 5			
A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D
									X			X	X	X	X							